NEWS

Non-GMO label getting a local push by Lundberg Family Farms

By MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL
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RICHVALE — Lundberg Family Farms is among the leaders in a trend to label foods as non-GMO.

GMO stands for genetically modified organisms, which are created through transferring genes from one organism to another.

Most Americans consume genetically modified foods every day. The majority of soy, cotton, corn and canola grown in the United States contains genetically modified crops, most of which have been altered to resist pests and weeds.

Other genetically modified foods may contain higher nutrients, are more tolerant to adverse growing conditions or produce higher yields.

Previously there has been no organized system in the United States for people to know whether the foods they buy contain GMOs.

Over the past two years, Lundberg Family Farms, which produces organic rice

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The group is a nonprofit organization called the Non-GMO project.

Grant Lundberg, chief executive officer of his family's business in Richvale, said Lundberg Family Farms has long been opposed to genetically modified foods, created through biotechnology.

Some genetically modified crops, such as corn and soybeans, spread pollen easily and can cross-pollinate with other crops, Lundberg explained.

"There is the potential to lose a lot of genetic history because when a product is released, it is very hard to keep it contained," Lundberg said.

Some food consumers have also had difficulty if they want to buy foods that do not contain genetic modifications.

About two years ago, the company that specializes in organic rice products joined other natural food companies to develop a nonprofit group to label non-GMO products, "to give the consumers an informed choice about what they are eating," Lundberg said.

The program has set up a "supply chain from seed breeders all the way through to retailers and consumers," he continued.

The program includes a third-party verification process, followed by inclusion of the non-GMO label.

"We know our customers have those concerns," Lundberg said. "The person

Other companies that helped fund the labeling project include Whole Foods Market, Eden Organic, Nature's Path and United Natural Foods.

Lundberg said many foreign countries, including Japan, Australia and the European Union, require labeling if products contain genetically modified foods, which creates a trade barrier for some U.S. products.

"The general U.S. ag policy has been pro-GMO," Lundberg said.

Currently, 50 brands in the United States and Canada have signed up for the new non-GMO project, he said, accounting for about 3,000 products.

Part of the labeling criteria includes a protocol to trace, test and segregate foods used, said Megan Westgate, executive director for the Non-GMO Project, based in Southern California.

The standard chosen by the group is 0.9 percent or less GMOs in foods — the same standards used in the European Union, Westgate explained.

The goal of the program is to make testing very efficient, so companies that do not use genetically modified foods don't end up spending a lot of money on testing.

For example, Westgate said, 91 percent of soy grown in the United States is genetically modified. If a company uses soy oil, testing each truckload could cost up to $16,000 a year.

But if the soy oil is tested further up the supply chain, the cost for testing is greatly reduced, she said.

"We're creating a structure in making non-GMO an affordable and practical thing.

"The most efficient place to test is when a crop is processed," Westgate said.

In the next couple of months, companies will be using up the remainder of their packaging material and rolling out with the redesigned containers that include the non-GMO seal.

She said the hope is that people will see the labels and become more informed about GMOs.

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